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ABSTRACT

Attitudes and perceptions of Old Dominion University students regarding the desegregation controversy and the university environment were surveyed. The study sample consisted of 363 whites and 136 blacks: about 1 out of 20 full-time white undergraduates and 1 out of 4 full-time black undergraduates. In addition to Likert-type attitudinal questions, the questionnaire allowed respondents to indicate whether they had observed or encountered various forms of racism within the university. With regard to an agreement between Governor Dalton and the federal government to further desegregate Virginia colleges and universities, almost three-fifths of the black respondents favored further desegregation (either supported the agreement or felt it did not go far enough); less than one-fourth of the white respondents did, and over one-third of the whites felt that the agreement went too far. Nearly three-fourths of the black respondents disagreed with Virginia political leaders' claim that equal educational opportunities for blacks and whites have already been established. An even larger proportion felt that there were too few blacks at the predominantly white Old Dominion University. Two-thirds of the black respondents agreed with the statement that campus life is too segregated, and one-third felt that many faculty at the university were prejudiced against blacks. In contrast, a majority of white respondents believed that equal educational opportunities for blacks and whites exist, only about one-fourth saw the university as too segregated, and seven percent believed that many faculty are prejudiced against black students. Black and white respondents also showed a marked divergence in their perceptions of racism within the university. (SW)

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RACISM AND THE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENT: STUDENT ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS*

by

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*A paper presented at the National Conference on Desegregation in Higher Education, Raleigh, North Carolina, July 19, 1979.

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Despite the progress made during the past decade toward desegregation of higher education, today's colleges and universities remain centers of racial inequality, segregation and racism. Dr. Stephen J. Wright, in his keynote speech to this conference earlier this morning, emphasized that black representation in the "flagship" universities and in the major professions is still tokenistic. He noted that blacks in higher education are disproportionately concentrated in the two-year public community colleges. He also asserted that the atmosphere at the predominantly white colleges and universities is one of "pervasive racism."

Those who manage our colleges and universities frequently claim that "revolutionary changes" and "tremendous racial progress" have already been achieved. They do not like to hear it pointed out that the main problems still remain before us. A social scientist whose research indicates that racial inequality, segregation, and racism are still massive problems runs the risk of being branded an enemy of the institution whose realities he has laid bare. Such is the case with the research reported in this paper. It led directly to my being fired by Old Dominion University.

This research was carried out in the midst of the conflict between the State of Virginia and the Federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare over desegregation of Virginia's system of public higher education. Virginia's political leaders, in justifying their prolonged resistance to further desegregation, claimed that they had already established equality of educational opportunity for blacks and whites. They dismissed remaining

patterns of segregation and inequality by claiming that blacks preferred to attend predominantly black institutions. They sought to arouse opposition to HEW by denouncing Federal "interference" with "state's rights" and by condemning "quotas" as a threat to "freedom of choice" and to "equality of education."

Perhaps the major stumbling block to agreement between HEW and Virginia was the coexistence side by side in Norfolk of predominantly white Old Dominion University and predominantly black Norfolk State University (called Norfolk State College until July, 1979). While HEW regarded the two institutions as a prime example of the "vestiges" of a "dual segregated system" and urged elimination of "duplicative" programs, Virginia posed as defender of the two institutions and the "freedom of choice" of their students. In short, while HEW sought further desegregation, Virginia leaders insisted that everybody was happy with the way things were:

The way things were included the following facts: Blacks made up only about two percent of the enrollment at the University of Virginia, VPI, and William and Mary, the three highest ranking institutions in the state system. Blacks were disproportionately concentrated in the two-year community colleges or in the two traditionally black four-year colleges, Norfolk State and Virginia State. Blacks in 1977-1978 made up approximately six percent of the student body at Old Dominion University.

In March, 1978, then newly elected Governor John Dalton announced that agreement had finally been reached with HEW on a statewide desegregation plan for public higher education in Virginia. A few days later, the present study, which had been in preparation for several months, was begun.

Data Collection

The aim of the study was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of Old Dominion University students as they related to the desegregation controversy and to the University environment. Did students see a need for further desegregation? Did they prefer separation or integration? Did they see racism or racial segregation as a problem at Old Dominion University? Were there important differences in attitudes and perceptions between blacks and whites?

Based upon a statistical profile of the University student body, a quota sample of full-time undergraduates was surveyed. Quotas were adjusted for proportional representation by academic division, class year, and sex. Because race was to be treated as an independent variable, quotas for blacks and whites were established separately. Because blacks made up only 6 percent of the student body, a disproportionately higher percentage of blacks were surveyed. The final sample consisted of 363 whites and 136 blacks. This meant that approximately one out of every twenty full-time white undergraduates and one out of every four full-time black undergraduate were surveyed.

The instrument included a number of attitudinal questions, most in the form of a Likert scale. It also included a section asking respondents whether they had observed or encountered various forms of racism within the University. Twenty-five students enrolled in the author's sociology course, "Minority Groups in the United States," assisted in the survey by helping to draft, pretest, and administer the survey instrument. The questionnaires, however, were filled out by respondents themselves, but their anonymity was carefully preserved.

Ending: Divergent Attitudes

There were substantial differences in how black and white students viewed then just announced agreement between Virginia and HEW:

The recent agreement between Governor Dalton and the Federal Department of Health, Education and Welfare to further desegregate colleges and universities in Virginia:

	Whites		Blacks	
	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Goes too far	34	119	18	25
Is a good agreement	17	61	33	44
Doesn't go far enough	6	21	26	35
No opinion, insufficient knowledge	43	152	23	31

While almost three-fifths of the black respondents favored further desegregation (either supported the agreement or felt it did not go far enough), less than one-fourth of the white respondents did. Nearly one-half of the whites indicated "no opinion," and over one-third felt that the agreement went "too far."

Several other questions also produced dramatic differences in the responses of blacks and whites.

Nearly three-fourths of the black respondents disagreed with the claim of Virginia political leaders that equal educational opportunities for blacks and whites had already been established. An even larger proportion felt that there are too few blacks at predominantly white Old Dominion University. Two-thirds of the black respondents agreed with the statement that campus life is "too segregated." One-third of the black respondents felt that "many faculty" at the University are prejudiced against blacks.

	Agree Percent		No Opinion Percent		Disagree Percent	
	White	Black	White	Black	White	Black
Blacks have same educational opportunities as whites	56	26	16	3	28	71
Campus life is too segregated	27	66	30	17	43	17
There are too few blacks at Old Dominion University	28	82	38	8	34	10
Blacks receive preference over better qualified whites in hiring for jobs	48	8	29	17	23	75
Many faculty at Old Dominion University are prejudiced	7	33	45	42	48	25

Virtually no blacks agreed that "reverse discrimination" occurs.

In contrast, a majority of white respondents believed that equal educational opportunities for blacks and whites do exist. Only about one-fourth of the white respondents saw the University as "too segregated," or saw blacks as underrepresented in the University's student body. Nearly one-half the white respondents believed that there is "reverse discrimination," and only seven percent believed that many faculty are prejudiced against black students. In addition, a much higher percentage of whites than blacks indicated a response of "no opinion" to most of these items, while a larger percentage of blacks indicated "strong" agreement of disagreement.

Findings: Divergent Perceptions

Respondents were asked whether they had encountered racism from various sources in the University during the previous six months. The following

table summarizes the responses to this question:

	Percentage reporting encountering racism	
	Blacks	Whites
Racism "in the remarks or behavior of faculty members in the classroom	65	26
Racism "in grades given by an instructor	48	7
Racism "in treatment by administrators or staff"	40	11
Racism "in behavior of campus police"	38	13

Thus, black and white respondents showed a marked divergence in their perceptions of racism within the University, similar to the divergence in racial attitudes. The finding that many blacks perceived racism in the classroom is consistent with the findings reported several years ago by William Boyd Desegregating America's Colleges in a 1973 nationwide survey of black college students. Boyd reported that approximately half of black students surveyed reported encountering racism in their educational institutions, particularly from faculty.

Official Reaction

On August 28, 1978, the Old Dominion University Office of Information Services issued a news release, prepared with the author's assistance, summarizing the findings of this research survey. The news release, entitled "Attitudes and Experiences Differ for ODU Students," was carefully written so as not to be misconstrued as an attack on the University. It suggested that the findings provided support for strengthening the University's

desegregation and affirmative action efforts. It neither accused the institution or individuals within it of being racist.

Nevertheless, the University's first official reaction was to deny the existence of racism and to discredit the study. The University Affirmative Action Director flatly stated, "If that is happening here, I am not aware of it." She further suggested that black respondents who complained of racism were not representative of the University's black student population. (Having worked with the University Affirmative Action Director as a member of the President's Committee on Affirmative Action during the previous year, I knew that she was, in fact, aware that racism was "happening here.")

Norfolk's two daily newspapers (owned by an influential former head of Old Dominion University's Board of Visitors) ran prominent stories about the research findings, emphasizing black student complaints of classroom racism. The Virginian-Pilot (8/31/78) headline read, "Racism at ODU, Black Students Believe." The Ledger-Star (8/30/78) headline was more specific: Blacks think racism affects ODU grades, survey finds." Both articles conveyed the impression that the study had been done in order to accuse Old Dominion University's administration and faculty of being racist.

A few days later (9/11/78) the University's student newspaper, The Mace and Crown, which had opposed HEW efforts to desegregate Virginia colleges and universities and urged ODU students to sue HEW if HEW cut off Federal funds to compel compliance, ran an editorial entitled "Resurrecting Racist Attitudes." It alleged that the research "resurrected skeletons from closets" and "hardened already hard attitudes of racism." At the same time, the editorial denied that racism was a problem at Old Dominion

University and attacked the research as a waste of money. The editorial was such a blatant attack on the freedom to conduct research on race relations that sixteen of the author's colleagues in the department of Sociology signed a letter of protest to the student newspaper characterizing the editorial as "outrageous" and "insidious slander" against "a legitimate piece of academic scholarship."

The dean of the School of Arts and Letters attacked the research as unscholarly and politically motivated. When the author met with him to explain and discuss the research, the Dean ridiculed black student complaints of classroom racism and went so far as to suggest that blacks who complained of classroom racism were merely exhibiting their own anti-white racism. Shortly thereafter, in early December, 1978, the author, whose outspoken anti-racism had previously been praised along with his research and teaching, was notified that he would not be reappointed for the 1979-80 academic year. As of the time of this writing (July, 1979), the author is unemployed.

Summary and Conclusions

One of the main forms of racism today is the notion that racism is no longer a serious problem in the United States. Exaggerated claims of black progress obscure the extremely limited nature of the changes that have actually occurred and serve to fuel the racist propaganda myth of "reverse discrimination." Virginia political leaders and administrative officials at Old Dominion University expressed this form of racism to rationalize their prolonged resistance to HEW calls for further desegregation of the state's system of public higher education. The findings of the research

study reported in this paper implicity provided a timely and embarrassing refutation of the official line. While the official line asserted that blacks enjoyed equal educational opportunities with whites and attributed persistent segregation to the voluntary separatist preferences of both blacks and whites, the black respondents in this study overwhelmingly felt that their education was unequal, segregated and racist. The University did not want to hear this or want to deal with the widespread classroom racism reported by black (and some white) students. Indeed, when the author proposed to the University's Affirmative Action Committee that it investigate whether classroom racism was a problem at Old Dominion University, the proposal was rejected by the Administration-dominated committee by a vote of 22 to 2!

Any honest observer of the academic scene in the United States today would have to conclude that, while apologists for racism like Arthur Jensen, Nathan Glazer, and James Coleman become instant celebrities, anti-racists run the risk of becoming unemployed.